

I'm Taking My Eggs and Going Home

How One Woman Dared to Say No to Motherhood

by
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Prologue

I've made a decision: when my husband dies, I'm going to adopt a child. I'll wait until Jose's gone and then I'll become a mother by adopting through the foster care system. If I want to have children, I'm going to have to do it without him. It will be better for everyone this way, especially him. For five years we've tried to have a baby of our own. We've hopped from one crazy train to the next, from fertility doctors to Chinese Medicine Practitioners and around again; we've even dabbled in witchcraft. At my lowest point, I hatched a plot to steal another woman's baby. I cased the local hospital, found a glitch in security, and formulated my getaway plan. All I needed was a willing accomplice. But Jose's annoying practicality got in the way and my plan fell through. So now I'm on the crazy train all by myself, plotting a new scheme and wondering how much longer that same pesky husband is going to stick around.

It's a shame it has to be this way, but it's for his own good. We've witnessed what it takes to go through the foster/adopt process—mandatory visits with biological parents, the late-night arrival of a frightened child, the bitter disappointment when that child is taken away again. We understand what's involved in bringing a damaged child into our home. I'm prepared to do it, but I'm not prepared to put my husband through it. He's been through enough already, trying to fulfill my dreams. So, I'm just going to wait until he's dead. For his sake, I only hope it's quick and painless.

I glance across the living room, peeking at Jose over the top of the *Natural Health* magazine I'm pretending to read. The cat that has settled in my lap opens one eye and shifts into a new, even more comfortable position. Jose continues to tap away at his computer, surfing the Internet for a new bike he can't live without, oblivious to my plans for a future without him. I used to worry about the time he spent on his computer and cell phone; I was afraid of brain tumors and radiation-related cancers. I'm not afraid anymore; just curious if this is what will finally do him in. Or maybe he'll have a heart attack, a stroke, or the bike accident I've feared for so long. I'll take anything quick. I'm 39; I don't have time to nurse him through a long, drawn-out illness.

I'm surprised and somewhat perturbed to see that Jose looks pretty healthy. With all the stress I've put him through during the past five years, I'd expect him to look older, more haggard, just a little closer to death. It's so typical of him to be contrary and perk up just when I need him perking down. Under the instruction of all those damn fertility doctors, he's lost weight, lowered his cholesterol, brought his blood pressure back down into the safe zone. He's cut his wine consumption so low you'd think *he* was pregnant. This means that the fatty liver's probably not going to get him either. Maybe it will just be old age. Jose is fifteen years older than me, and once upon a time we wished it could have been different—that I'd been born earlier or he later, or that we'd met sooner. But when he was 20 and marrying for the first time, I was five and sneaking raspberry cookies from my best friend Simon, out of view of our teachers. Now the age difference should work to my advantage. The men on his mother's side barely make it past 50 and Jose has just turned 53, so the odds are in my favor.

I start to calculate how long I have if I still want to be eligible to adopt. I think I'm safe at 45; Jose's got six years to get busy dying in that case. But if he lasts more than *ten* years, I'll be 50. Will they still give a child to a 50-year-old single mom? And will I be able to handle it, especially with a child who will need special care? Would it be fair to raise a child with only one older parent? What if something happens to me? I need to get on with this.

It's a shame I have to do it without Jose, though. He would have been such a great dad. I can easily imagine him teaching our little girl to ride a bike or perching a little boy—a mini version of himself—in his lap and pressing his finger up to a flashlight so our

son can see his bones inside. But Jose's no longer in the picture; he's not part of my plan. I don't know how much life he has left—maybe decades, maybe not—but I want the rest of our lives together to be good, even if it's short.

Lately, life hasn't been good at all and I wonder if he regrets marrying me. He's already done his family stint and has two grown children, but for five years—our entire married lives—we've been trying to have a baby together. He's been doing it for me—his young wife who always wanted a big family—and he's done whatever was required of him. He's had his testicles sliced open and stitched back together again; he's driven two hours in L.A. traffic to be stuck with an acupuncturist's needles; he's been subjected to a steady regimen of pills and supplements, submitted to the hands of faith healers, masturbated into plastic cups, and provided me with sex-on-demand, whether he wanted it or not. He's held my hand while doctors performed miracle treatments on me and he's held all of me tight when I cried because they didn't work. So I'm not going to put him through it anymore. I'm just going to wait until he's dead and then I will become a mother.

He says he doesn't want a big funeral when he goes, but there are people who love him, who'll need to mourn his passing. I can picture the people who knew us when we were nothing more than friends. I can remember them saying how glad they were when we finally got together. They'll think I'm so brave when I maintain my composure. How will I tell them I've already made plans for my future? And how long should I wait before I put my plans into action?

For a second, I think about Jose being gone. I imagine his face without that smile I love so much. I see myself laying a single rose on his chest and kissing his cold, waxy cheek. I think about hearing *Summer Wind* again and knowing he's not there to dance with me. But I can't think about all this now; I have to think about my baby.

"I'm going to make tea," Jose suddenly says, getting up from his seat. "Would you like some?"

He catches me by surprise and intrudes on my dark fantasy. I check my facial expression and force it down into something more relaxed, stretching my eyebrows to iron out the thought wrinkle that always bunches between them, and letting my lips drop from their tight, pursed position into a neutral smile. He always knows when I'm

deep in thought and will ask me what I'm thinking about. I hope he doesn't ask this time. I don't want to have to tell him, "I was making plans for when you're dead."

"I'd love some tea," I say in the most nonchalant voice I can muster. He has no idea of the scheme I've concocted. He's oblivious to the clock now ticking slowly down until his ultimate demise—a time bomb in an action movie, with me as the evil villain who's just pushed the big red button.

"Would you like a piece of gingerbread, too?" he asks, looking at me through sly eyes, as if he's asking me if I'd like to commit a cardinal sin with him. This is one of the things I most love about Jose—how he can make even the most innocent thing seem like a great adventure, how he takes the simplest of my British pleasures—tea and gingerbread—and gives it a passionate Latin twist. Whenever he asks me, "How would you like to come for a bike ride with me?" or "What do you say to a walk and a cup of coffee?" his eyes sparkle with the excitement of temptation and I know that if I go along, it's going to be the thrill of my life.

"Gingerbread?" I say. "Don't mind if I do."

He grins and disappears into the kitchen. In that moment, the dark balloon of my grim fantasy explodes and the absurdity of what I've been telling myself snaps in my face. My great plan, my infallible solution to all our problems is to wait for the man I love to die so that I can be a mother. This man who would walk over broken glass for me, the man I want to spend the rest of my life with, a man who can turn gingerbread into an erotic indulgence. I laugh out loud; it's the only decent response to my own twisted logic.

"What's that?" Jose calls from the kitchen.

"Nothing," I say, but it's not nothing; it's everything, and I very nearly threw it all away. I'm astounded that I might have allowed life with a wonderful man like my husband to pass me by while I just...waited. The idea that the precious moments we share every day, the simple things like a mutual love for gingerbread—the good, rich molasses kind—add up to nothing. The fact that I would fritter away the joy I have now for some unknown future, an imagined notion of personal fulfillment, some crazy elusive dream of the bliss of motherhood; it's nonsense. Waiting for Jose to die is the

most deranged of all the deranged thoughts I've recently had. And this, right at this moment, is when I know this madness has to stop.

The past five years have changed us both. The two joyous people who stood barefoot beneath a gazebo in Napa and pledged to take care of one another forever are moving through life like two disconnected androids. The couple whose mutual passion bubbled beneath a surface of decorum for so long, until it could no longer be contained, now has sex once a month, if they're not too tired or in the middle of a fight, and only then for the sole purpose of attempted procreation. The adventuresome pair that traveled to exotic places, made impromptu trips to the opera, and planned great escapades together, now stay home, or worse, stay at work, to avoid the inevitable nightly conversation about children and doctors and fertile windows. And one of them is thinking that when the other dies, she can finally get what she wants. So it's time to make a drastic change.

I lift the sleeping cat from my lap, still in her curled position, and place her gently in the warm indentation I've just vacated on the couch. I step lightly to the kitchen door and watch my husband through the veil of a wooden bead curtain. He has warmed the teapot and the *his 'n' hers* mugs that my brother back in England gave us for Christmas. Mine says *Hippy Chick*; Jose's says *Big Fella*. (Jose wasn't sure if this was a dig at his waistline or a presumptuous statement about his manhood.) I watch as Jose slices two squares of gingerbread and places them on small blue-green plates—The Queen's Dishes, we call them—our one set of matching dinnerware that we usually bring out just for company. We haven't had a dinner party in more than two years and the dishes have slowly been relegated to daily use. Some are chipped or cracked; we've lost a couple to serious accidents; they're all a little the worse for wear.

The electric teakettle boils and clicks off and Jose drops a pyramid-shaped teabag into the teapot and tops it with boiling water. He stirs the pot, replaces the lid and covers it with the Union Jack tea cozy that my mother knitted for him and embroidered with his name. So many good memories in one short ritual. So many good times already stored away and so many more still to come. I can't just let our time together pass as if it's not important, as if all I'm doing is waiting for it to be over.

Jose senses me behind the curtain and turns my way. We've always had a kind of psychic connection; it's good to know that despite everything, it's still there. He smiles at

me, his brown eyes twinkling. The smile is still there, too, and a little corner of my toughened, leathery heart softens again, reminding me that I wasn't always this crazy.

Not so long ago, I was just a woman who thought it would be wonderful to have children with a man like Jose, to raise them together and to form our sweet babies into intelligent, thoughtful adults. Children would have made life a great adventure. But standing there in the kitchen, I realize that life will have to be great without them, too.



PRAISE FOR *I'm Taking My Eggs and Going Home*

“In this memoir of love and loss, Lisa Manterfield dares to reveal the depths of her desperation, and in so doing, dares to reveal the depths of her heart.”

~ Jennie Nash, author of
*The Victoria's Secret Catalog Never Stops Coming
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“*I'm Taking My Eggs And Going Home* is a wonderful book, full of heart and hope. As funny as it is moving, I couldn't put it down.”

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~ Stephanie Baffone, LPCMH, NCC
Licensed and board certified
mental health therapist and writer

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Lisa